

LGBT YOUTH AND SERVICES TO SUPPORT THEM: A SNAPSHOT OF THE KNOWLEDGE BASE AND RESEARCH NEEDS



The social and legal environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the United States is changing rapidly. Despite these changes, existing research suggests that LGBT people, like some other minority groups, may face disproportionate risks to their economic and social well-being.

This brief summarizes the knowledge base and research needs related to two types of ACF-funded services that may be especially relevant to youth who are LGBT: assistance for runaway and homeless youth (RHY) and sexual health education for adolescents. The brief address three topics: (1) homelessness and sexual risk behavior among LGBT youth (and those who are questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity), (2) LGBT youths' service preferences and experiences in RHY or sexual health education programs, and (3) strategies for providing services effectively to LGBT youth. In general, research and data sources inclusive of LGBT populations are limited, and substantial knowledge gaps exist regarding human services for LGBT youth.

HOMELESSNESS AND SEXUAL RISK BEHAVIOR AMONG LGBT YOUTH

Homelessness. In six cities participating in YouthCount!—a federal interagency initiative that aims to develop new approaches to counting unaccompanied homeless youth—19 percent of homeless youth surveyed indicated they identify as LGB and 3 percent as questioning.¹ Across the six cities, the share of youth identifying as LGB ranged from 10 to 43 percent.

Respondents to a survey of a purposive sample of providers working with homeless youth estimated that LGBT youth made up 40 percent of their clientele, on average.²

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Research on youth homelessness strongly suggests that LGBT youth are overrepresented among runaway and homeless youth



Sexual risk behavior. Sexual minority youth face health disparities related to sexually transmitted infections and may be at higher risk than heterosexuals for unintended pregnancy. Analyses of population-based surveys of high school students in 13 states and school districts found higher prevalence of sexual risk behaviors among students who identified themselves as LGB and students who had sexual contact with both sexes compared to non-LGB students.³ (Prevalence of risk behaviors among transgender students is unknown because they were not identified in these surveys.) According to disease surveillance data, most new HIV infections among young people (ages 13 to 24) occur among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men.⁴

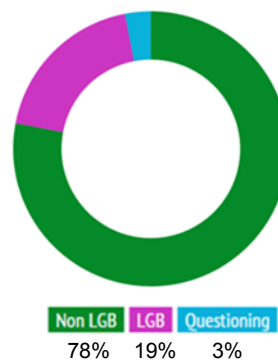
Relatively high rates of pregnancy involvement among sexual minority adolescents may be linked to risky sexual behavior in response to stigma, or to lower levels of protective factors, such as school or community connectedness, among these youth.

Research needs. The characteristics of the LGBT homeless youth population, the reasons that LGBT youth may face increased risk of homelessness and poor sexual health outcomes, and factors that may minimize these risks are not well understood. Future research should explore:

The size, composition, and needs of the LGBT homeless youth population. These studies could compare the characteristics and needs of LGBT homeless youth are similar to or different from their non-LGBT counterparts.

Factors that increase or reduce the risk of homelessness and poor sexual health among LGBT youth. Studies are needed to identify individual, family, and community characteristics (including policy environments) that affect the likelihood that LGBT youth will become homeless or engage in risky sexual behavior. Additional data are needed to examine risk among subpopulations of LGBT youth, including youth of color and transgender youth.

Self-Identification of Homeless Youth Surveyed by YouthCount!



Source: Mary Cunningham, "Homeless LGBTQ Youth."

Studies examining pregnancy involvement among LGB adolescents in the United States and Canada using population-based survey data found that LGB youth were 2 to 10 times likelier to become pregnant or cause a pregnancy than their non-LGB peers.⁴



LGBT YOUTHS' SERVICE EXPERIENCES

Service providers may find it difficult to collect information about the sexual orientation and gender identity of youth in their programs for many reasons—for example, youth may not have well-formed sexual identities or may be reticent to share this information out of fear of harassment, staff may lack the skills or protocols necessary to ask questions about sexual orientation or gender identity sensitively, or youth and staff may be concerned that the information will be disclosed to other agencies or parties without the youth's consent.⁵

Research on potential challenges to serving LGBT youth has highlighted issues related to negative social attitudes and the characteristics of available services. In a set of case studies of providers serving runaway and homeless youth, agency staff noted issues including the difficulty of overcoming community-level stigma, especially toward youth of color and transgender or gender nonconforming youth, and a lack of local resources that focus on LGBT youth.⁶ School-based sexual health education programs generally do not incorporate discussion of same-sex sexuality and health risks and thus may not address the specific concerns or circumstances of LGBT youth.⁷

Research needs. Additional research is needed to help policymakers and providers better understand the extent to which LGBT youth currently use ACF-funded services and the nature of access barriers that may exist. These studies should examine:

The number and characteristics of LGBT youth accessing RHY or sexual health education services. Research is also needed to assess how collection of administrative data on sexual orientation and gender identity can be improved in these programs.

Barriers to accessing RHY and sexual health education services. Future research on this topic could explore whether perceived barriers differ across locations and subpopulations of LGBT youth.

The service pathways of LGBT youth involved in multiple systems. Studies are needed to document how and why LGBT youth move across service systems—including the homelessness, juvenile justice, and child welfare systems—and whether their experiences differ from those of non-LGBT

Little information is currently available about the extent to which LGBT youth are accessing federally funded homelessness or sexual health education services.



youth.

STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING SERVICES EFFECTIVELY TO LGBT YOUTHS

A variety of authors and organizations, including government agencies, has offered recommendations for improving services for LGBTQ runaway and homeless youth. These recommendations emphasize prohibiting discrimination and ensuring the safety of sexual minority youth, increasing staff cultural competency, and addressing the unique shelter and service needs of LGBTQ youth.

To make sexual health education services more relevant to LGBTQ youth, researchers have recommended steps such as discussing sexual orientation and gender identity during classes, describing romantic relationships in terms that do not assume heterosexuality, and providing LGBT cultural competency training to instructors. The literature on effectiveness of sexual health education services for LGBT youth is very limited.

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**For
more-detailed
information and
specific research
suggestions,
please visit the
project webpage
[here](#).**

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- ⁶ Burwick, Andrew, Gary Gates, Scott Baumgartner, and Daniel Friend. (2014). *Human Services for Low-Income at At-Risk LGBT Populations: An Assessment of the Knowledge Base and Research Needs*. OPRE Report Number 2014-79. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
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